Crisis in the Profession, or the Failure to Imagine the New

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Abstract

This essay provides a thorough analysis of Bruce Robbins's, Jonathan Kramnick's, and John Guillory's recent books on the state of the discipline of literary criticism. In spite of the otherwise vast differences between these books, the authors have three shared commitments. They assume that criticism (understood as the reading of literature) still remains the main focus of departments of literary study. They work with an overwhelmingly male canon of theorists. Although women are invoked as examples, men remain the thought-leaders. They all ignore, neglect, or mischaracterize the concerns of philosophies investigating judgment, experience, and subjectivity. As a result, they present us with an image of a profession in which it is taboo to invoke ordinary experience as a starting point for investigations. By focusing on Robbins's and Guillory's response to Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (and thus to the phenomenon of post-critique), and by bringing out Kramnick's commitment to positivism and formalism, I conclude that Robbins and Kramnick look to the past for salvation, whereas Guillory shows that the future is unlikely to be any different from the present. The effect of professionalization and disciplinary pressures make academic critics highly resistant to the new.

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Criticism and Politics: A Polemical Introduction, Bruce Robbins. Stanford UP, 2022.

Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study, John Guillory. U of Chicago P, 2022.

Criticism and Truth: On Method in Literary Studies, Jonathan Kramnick. U of Chicago P, 2023.

1. Snap Judgments

Literary studies are undergoing an existential crisis. The discipline seems less important than it once did, the profession is shrinking, the job market vanishing. In response, three literary critics have produced three very different books. Setting out to keep the spirit of the protest movements of the 1960s alive, Bruce Robbins looks back in anger; Jonathan Kramnick tries to convince us that our common craft of close reading produces verifiable truth; John Guillory hopes that, by analyzing how literary criticism became an academic discipline and a profession and by studying the effects of that history today, he will produce the knowledge we need to find a way forward.

Now for some snap judgments: Robbins's self-styled polemic reads as if it was written way too fast. The scholarship is slapdash, and the writing lacks the conceptual clarity required for successful polemicizing. There is a fatal tendency to take quotations out of context, and then saddle hapless authors with crimes for which any charitable reader would say they are not responsible. At once nostalgic and dyspeptic, *Criticism and Politics* sometimes becomes downright nasty, as when Robbins accuses Rita Felski of somehow wanting to "talk about flowers rather than drowned Syrian children," or—even worse—"to see such photographs [of drowned children] as if they were flowers" (8). Surely theoretical disagreements shouldn't drive us to accuse colleagues of taking pleasure in the death of innocent children.[1]

In contrast, Kramnick's short book is crisp and clear, with moments of refreshing originality, in spite of the fact that his formalist assumptions are hardly new. Grappling with a genuinely important question—How does literary criticism produce truth?—he goes to original sources—Gilbert Ryle!—to find answers. I would have liked to praise *Criticism and Truth* wholeheartedly. Alas, I found it unconvincing. Kramnick never really explains why he believes that a few formal moves can stand for the whole discipline, nor does he pause to consider that "in-sentence quotation" (36) can and will be used to support utterly misguided claims. Nevertheless, *Criticism and Truth* made me want to engage seriously and in depth with its questions. This is no small feat.

Guillory's impressive scholarship taught me a lot. He excels in historical analysis. I enjoyed reading about the death of rhetoric as a discipline and about the short-lived careers of *belles lettres* and philology as contenders for the institutional space now occupied by

literary criticism. This enormous book is serious, wide-ranging, exemplary of good scholarship in the historicizing and sociologizing humanities. Unfortunately, the writing is quite turgid, and at times, I felt that I was drowning in details.

A curious thing happened to me as I tried to work out a more careful account of each text. The mood or atmosphere of each book somehow crept into my own writing: in response to Robbins, I became rather polemical; Kramnick inspired me to engage in close philosophical reading; Guillory made me want to analyze my own sociological and institutional position, to see if it explains at least some of my responses to these three texts.

Here are some of the relevant conclusions from that exercise. If Guillory knew the details of my particular background, I think he would say that I am unusually weakly professionalized, far more likely to identify with the general discipline of literary studies—the intellectual work, the ideas, the inquiries—than with a specific subdiscipline, the relevant institutions, or the profession as such. He might even say that my specific trajectory explains why I find it more natural to focus on the arguments, logic, and scholarship of the books under review, than, say, on an analysis of the authors' respective positions in the profession. For what it's worth, the authors of these books all hold named chairs at well-known private universities. (So do I.) Finally, Guillory might also say that my Norwegian formation explains why I don't believe that there has to be such a great difference between academic writing and so-called public writing and why I persist in thinking that professors make a huge mistake when they begin to persuade themselves that they are so much smarter than ordinary ("lay") people just because they belong to what they take to be a select elite, a guild of chosen ones.

2. Shared Assumptions

So much for the snap judgments. Now for a brief list of features these otherwise very different texts share: (1) They all address literary criticism, as opposed to, say, literary studies (a term that might include history of the book, literary history, sociology of literature, philosophy, media, digital humanities, cultural theory, and so on). I take literary criticism to mean the work of reading and analyzing or interpreting literature (a concept with unusually fuzzy borders) in the light of the critic's own historical, theoretical, philosophical, and intellectual interests. The common assumption seems to be that criticism remains the main focus of English departments (and other departments of languages and literature). But how true is this? An

increasing number of colleagues no longer work mainly on literature. Instead, they define themselves as critical or cultural theorists, or work on media, digital culture, and other cultural phenomena, with or without literature. Some colleagues don't hesitate to denounce an interest in literature, particularly in literature from earlier historical periods, as old-fashioned, even reactionary.

(2) They work with an overwhelmingly male canon of theorists. Although women are invoked as examples, men remain the thought-leaders. Given that women have entered the literary academy in droves in the aftermath of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, our relative absence from the theoretical canon is disheartening.

(3) They are all wobbly or downright weak on Kant's understanding of judgment as intrinsically linked to an experiencing subject (as opposed to reason, which for Kant compels assent, regardless of who is doing the reasoning). I take this to be a symptom of a wider problem, namely that all three ignore, neglect, or mischaracterize the concerns of philosophies investigating existence, experience, subjectivity, and subject-other relations. Robbins's theoreticism, Kramnick's formalism, and Guillory's sociological analysis leave little space for such questions. As a result, all three either deliberately or unwittingly endorse a picture of literary criticism that presupposes, at the very least, a tacit assumption that, when we try to confront the crisis of the discipline, we don't need to consider human agency at all.

Stanley Cavell would have seen the lack of interest in experience and agency as a symptom of the wish to reject, or get beyond, the human.[2] Today, that wish gets associated with postmodern theory, not least with its rejection of liberal humanism (a rejection I have participated in and support). But it has deeper and older roots. The positivist yearning for truth, understood as knowledge unaffected by human subjectivity, falls under the same rubric. Certain forms of scientism (as opposed to actual science) share the same ideal, as does the formalist tendency to discuss the meaning of words, including theoretical concepts, without taking into account the ordinary language games, the specific instances of use, that alone give them their varied meaning.

In the three books under review, the avoidance of subjectivity and experience is particularly puzzling, given that the very activity of literary criticism presupposes a reading subject, an individual reader who thinks and writes—that is to say, someone who acts and therefore also has to shoulder the responsibility for her actions.[3] This is also the reason why Robbins and Guillory misread Felski: when she calls for a literary criticism that pays serious attention to

experience, they can't even imagine that this could be a crucial intellectual question.

One effect of these critics' neglect of philosophies of experience and subjectivity is the almost complete absence of discussion of the field of literature and philosophy, in which ethics and morality, alongside questions of language, and skepticism have been central for decades. If they had been more interested in these fields, they would also have been able to quote more women. Whether by coincidence or not, influential thinkers in this field have in fact often been women: Simone de Beauvoir, Iris Murdoch, Cora Diamond, Martha Nussbaum, for example. I remember a time when literary critics took ethics to be a reactionary field, opposed to politics, possibly because they equated morality with the strait-laced sexual morality of the Victorians, rather than with, say, the question of what we owe to others. Is that prejudice still with us?

(4) Two of the three critics, Robbins and Guillory, engage more or less critically with Felski's call for postcritique in *The Limits of Critique* (2015). The third, Kramnick, doesn't mention her at all probably because he really isn't concerned with change: his main idea is that we should promote the craft we all share, a craft that he appears to think has barely changed since the inception of the discipline. As I worked through these texts, I came to see their different responses to Felski's work as a kind of litmus test of their relationship to the new. Let's begin, then, with Robbins and not least his account of Felski. (Full disclosure: I contributed to Elizabeth S. Anker and Felski's 2017 anthology *Critique and Postcritique*.)

3. Robbins: Polemics and Mockery

Robbins's subtitle is "A Polemical Introduction." But *Criticism and Politics* isn't really an introduction, if by that one understands a text that people can use to get a first overview of the subject matter. Launching straight into the middle of a number of ongoing debates, Robbins never pauses to introduce his theoretical protagonists and generally appears to assume a high level of knowledge in his readers.

Taking himself to be introducing the Left intellectual tradition, Robbins begins his book by making a reasonably attractive case for the need for criticism to be political, but not in a narrow and sectarian way. He warns against equating politics with identity politics. (In this sense, his idea of Left politics appears to be out of touch with dominant trends on the Left today.) His main idea is that literary criticism today is in danger of forgetting or disavowing the transformative social movements of the 1960s. *Criticism and Politics* discusses politics, history, aesthetics, critique—all key themes in

literary theory. It does not discuss literary criticism in the sense of reading, whether as interpretation or as a phenomenological experience. His overview of critics on the Left largely sticks to well-known themes. The most original—but also the most sketchy—part of the book is the idea that criticism should become part of a new vision of governance, a vision that recalls Percy Bysshe Shelley's idea that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (46).

His critical heroes are Matthew Arnold (as a cultural critic), Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Edward Said, Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Fredric Jameson, and Terry Eagleton. I don't think Robbins intends to marginalize women critics as thoroughly as he does. He makes sincere efforts to include a few: Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler (who now identifies as nonbinary), Hortense Spillers. But their theorizing isn't central to any of his key points. There is one woman, however, whose work deeply matters to Robbins—namely his *bête noire*, Felski. The whole idea of writing a self-styled polemic, Robbins declares, came from the "proclamations" made by critics espousing "so-called surface reading and post-critique" (7). In this book, Felski is made to stand for these (ill-defined) trends.[4]

To Robbins, these trends "looked like attempts to depoliticize the practice of criticism and even to carry forward the right-wing culture war's attack on the humanities." The "proclamations" of such critics made him feel "called out." He had found his vocation, the *raison d'être* of this book, namely "to mock what I saw as self-betraying silliness" (7). This book, then, is not just polemical, it's an attempt at mockery. But a polemic is hard to do well. The best polemics give plausible accounts of the views they oppose. A critic capable of fully acknowledging the reasons why their opponents say what they say will make by far the most telling points. Robbins never even tries to do so. Good polemics are entertaining to read. They make readers feel inspired and energized, even when they disagree. But Robbins's concepts are slippery, and he often contradicts himself. As for mockery, it is usually defined as derision, or as insulting and contemptuous action or speech. While I have nothing against a good polemic, I don't think mockery has any place in serious intellectual work.

Since Robbins declares that Felski's call for postcritique in the now almost 10-year-old *The Limits of Critique* was the inspiring impulse for his own book, I began to wonder what it is about her work that makes Robbins so angry. At first glance, Felski shouldn't be his natural enemy. She began her career as a feminist critic, inspired by the social movements of the 1960s. She has always had a strong affinity for the work of the Frankfurt School and its recent successors. She has never, to my knowledge, allied herself with any

right-wing causes. Going through *Criticism and Politics*, I realized that Robbins never provides an analysis of her work. The strategy is always to quote snippets out of context and then ridicule them.

Robbins complains that Felski falsely accuses "the language of politics"' of presenting itself as "'the only permissible way of accounting' for literary works" (Felski qtd. in Robbins 6). But how false is Felski's claim? Maybe she exaggerates. Maybe this isn't as dominant a trend as she thinks. But are there no critics on the Left who have made politics the only acceptable rationale for literary criticism? Is she inventing the whole phenomenon? More to the point, Robbins himself seems to say that criticism is and must be political, that all literary criticism must, in the end, have something to say about inequality, injustice, and democracy. He complains that "the word injustice does not appear in the index of Felski's" *The Limits of Critique* (7). He lauds critics "committed to the proposition that criticism is or should be a political activity" (153). He thinks that critics need to "ensure that their work makes changes in the world" (14).

Felski's "portrait of the critic as monster of pure negativism" amounts to "dog whistle rhetoric," Robbins writes, for it reminds him of "the right's use of potent stereotypes like the Black welfare queen or the paroled repeat-offender rapist" (172). These are fighting words. But at least for me, they don't strike home. I just can't see the connection between Felski's emphasis on critique as suspicion and "welfare queens" and "rapists."

When Felski asks why we can't consider "love" a serious topic of literary criticism, Robbins immediately denounces "her inclination to align herself with actual 'family values' positions, beginning with 'love'" (172). But since when was "love" an inherently reactionary topic? Women and men on the Left, ranging from the utopian socialists through Emma Goldman and Alexandra Kollontai thought love was a highly political issue, as did the feminist activists in the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, the discourse on love in the Christian tradition has permeated Western literature, for good or for bad, for 2,000 years. Surely, such an influential historical phenomenon is worth some serious scholarly attention? Surely, it's possible to analyze love without forgetting about one's political commitments? Why is Robbins so eager to hand love over to the right wing?

Robbins's rage against postcritique knows no bounds. Felski and critics of her ilk, he claims, threaten to destroy academic criticism as we know it. But why? Their work seems perfectly academic to me. The main reason he gives is that Felski's "heroes are ordinary readers" and that she has committed the sin of attacking "academic experts of the left," who fail to appreciate ordinary

responses to literature. To make his point, Robbins would have to explain why the experts he has in mind are right and precisely why and where Felski gets it wrong. Ventriloquizing what he takes to be Felski's point, he continues, "It would be better if academic critics stopped thinking of themselves as leftists and left ordinary readers alone. Who needs the profession, anyway?" (172). Here, Robbins's attitude—a strange mix of radical politics and intellectual arrogance—reminds me of Herbert Marcuse's mandarin disdain for the "chap on the street" in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964).[5] I, too, think criticism should strive to make a change in the world. I too think history matters crucially to our understanding of ourselves. But how can we as critics claim that we defend democracy, equality, and justice if we also harbor such condescension toward ordinary people?

Felski isn't attacking the profession. She isn't arguing that we don't need to learn anything, that serious graduate-level study is unnecessary for a literary critic. I take her, rather, to argue that we lose something of value when we cut the bonds that link us, professional readers, to the ordinary readers we once were: the teenagers who had the capacity to get lost in a book, who took characters and plot to be of value, and who cared about love as much as about war. How can such obvious truths threaten the discipline and the profession? Honestly, if our profession can find no space at all for the concerns of ordinary human beings, I think it deserves to go to the wall. The question Robbins implicitly raises is this: Who gets to define what topics are to count as intellectually interesting? Or in Bourdieuian terms, Who will accumulate enough symbolic capital to impose their own interests on the rest of the field? Clearly, women still start with a handicap in that struggle.

It would be unfair of me not to mention that Robbins is unfair to other critics, too. One example must suffice, namely the surprising claim that Jean-Paul Sartre believed that "at least for political purposes, the past is meaningless" (Robbins 161). Robbins's source for this strange claim is the passage in *What Is Literature?* which begins so memorably with the sentence: "It must be borne in mind that most critics are men who have not had much luck and who, just about the time they were growing desperate, found a quiet little job as cemetery watchmen" (Sartre 41).

Robbins overlooks the fact that this passage is part of a sequence in which Sartre gives voice to the point of view of his opponents, the critics who reject his call for committed literature. The only critic he actually mentions in this context, the journalist, writer, and reviewer Ramon Fernandez (1894–1944), proves the point. An erstwhile communist, Fernandez later became a fascist and a Nazi collaborator, lucky enough to die of natural causes just before the Liberation. Any French reader at the time would have known

that Sartre couldn't conceivably have meant to praise Fernandez.[6] I mention this specific example for it shows that Robbins wishes to defend (and rightly so) the view that the past, history, is alive in present actions and choices, as well as in present structures and institutions. Yet, when Felski writes in *Limits of Critique* that she is interested in "the question of why past texts matter and how they speak to us now" (qtd. 175), Robbins dismisses it as "verbiage" and "colorful propaganda," without further explanation (175).

In the end, I began thinking that the best explanation for why Robbins is so utterly convinced that Felski must be a reactionary is that he, like many other critical theorists, is a theoreticist. Theoreticists believe that the right theory somehow guarantees the right practice, that if you just get the theory—the concepts—right, then the correct politics will follow. It follows that, if someone fails to share their theoretical premises, theoreticists will immediately accuse them of being reactionary, even if those premises apparently have very little to do with politics and even if the theoretical dissenter in fact agrees with the theoreticist on many or most political issues. One example is the, to me puzzling, belief that Wittgenstein's vision of language is intrinsically reactionary, whereas Saussure's is not. Or the belief, rife in the 1990s, that unless you subscribed to Judith Butler's Foucault-inspired ideas about gender, you just couldn't be properly antihomophobic.

Theoreticists fail to realize that even the best constructed theory is an utterance, an action or intervention made by a specific thinker in a specific situation. That is why no theory will guarantee that its proponents will be politically correct in every context. Robbins appears simply to assume that critics who disagree with him, say, about the nature and uses of texts, reading, and the subject matter of literary criticism are also his political enemies. Perhaps this assumption explains why he simply cannot accept even the innocuous suggestion that there may be many roads to critique, many ways of being critical and political, let alone the idea that not every work of literary criticism needs to be primarily focused on politics.

4. Kramnick: Truth as Elegant Form

Kramnick borrows his title from Roland Barthes's 1966 polemic *Critique et vérité*. Although he never mentions Barthes, his book shares important assumptions with his predecessor: literary critics are writers and creators in their own right; we shouldn't measure the value of literary criticism by the criteria of the natural sciences; language is form (as opposed to, for example, use, expression, or utterance); literary writing is fundamentally different from other

kinds of writing. Barthes concludes with a flourish, declaring that criticism is a way of entering into the "truth of writing" (94).[7] It is as if Kramnick picks up where Barthes ends.

Some of Kramnick's most fundamental assumptions, then, are not new, for they belong squarely to the formalist tradition from Barthes through deconstruction. Nevertheless, *Criticism and Truth* is a refreshing read. Setting out to defend literary criticism as a professional discipline, Kramnick insists that literary criticism creates truth and, therefore, contributes to knowledge. To back this claim up, he zooms in on what he takes to be a common method shared by all literary critics—namely close reading. If one thinks of close reading as the New Critics did, one will misunderstand Kramnick's book. For the New Critics, close reading was the attempt to grasp the totality, the fundamental commitments, the organic unity, of a literary work by focusing on the work itself and not on elements they considered to be outside the work. In Kramnick's rendering, the idea of grasping the whole of a work has disappeared. For him, close reading appears to be a more atomistic exercise: an analysis of a few sentences or a few lines in a literary text will suffice.

Part of the entertainment of Kramnick's text is his utterly counterintituitive claims. Close reading, he insists, isn't reading at all; it is writing (22), "an expert practice of writing prose and making text, of weaving one's own words with words that precede and shape them" (35). Close reading, then, is a "method" (36), "craftwork in a literal sense," something one "makes with one's hands," a "kind of dexterity" (35). There is no discussion of the process or experience of writing itself. Kramnick's argument is based exclusively on the formal, analyzable artifacts critics produce or, in other words, our professional publications. Kramnick's concept of close reading, then, firmly excludes the kind of readings we produce in the classroom and in conversation.

Like Kramnick, I am convinced that writing is thinking. It is in the process of writing itself that we figure out what we actually think, what we want to say. I certainly agree that writing isn't taking dictation from a preformed intention.[8] But I still think that when I do a literary analysis, I don't just interweave quotations: I look, think, read, reread, draft some sentences, delete the same sentences, look again at the text, decide to read a book of philosophy or theory, go back to the text, and so on.

By defining close reading as the practice of "weaving one's own words with words that precede and shape them," Kramnick signals his preoccupation with quotation techniques. His first three examples are block quotations, where the critic as it were points to the block in her own sentences; "quotation without quoting," which Kramnick also calls "critical free indirect discourse," defined as a

kind of "practiced mimicry" where the critic "sounds like" the text she is discussing (43); and, finally, "interpretive plot summary" (67), which to me sounds much like paraphrase, a term Kramnick never discusses. But his fourth and favorite quotation style, by far, is embedded or in-sentence quotation, in which the critic weaves snippets of the literary text into her own sentences by dexterous arrangement of syntax, ellipses, and quotations marks. This is the technique he considers to be "paradigmatic for the whole" (58). For the sake of brevity, therefore, I will use in-sentence or embedded quotation as shorthand for all these techniques.

Kramnick gets quite carried away by the idea that our "practices of quotation" are "an immersion at the microscale in the very stuff of literature" (33). He means that literary critics use language to write about language. Kramnick calls this "medium coincidence." Reminding us that "[a]rt historians don't paint about painting nor do musicologists write music about music" (71), Kramnick thinks that such "medium coincidence" makes us unique. But his claim is hardly self-evident. Legal scholars, philosophers, and political theorists work with texts. So do theologians and most historians. Why doesn't Kramnick even mention such text-based fields?

Searching for an answer, I began to think that Kramnick's romance with quotation techniques must rest on assumptions he takes so much for granted that he never thinks of spelling them out. What picture holds him captive? My best guess is that he assumes there is something special about quoting literature, as opposed to other texts. That line about "immersion" in the "very stuff of literature" may give us a clue. I suspect that Kramnick believes that there is such a thing as literary language, which he takes to be entirely different from all other ways of using language. Or maybe he thinks that literary texts possess the ineffable essence of "literariness." If he does, it would explain why he thinks that our quotation techniques are unique. They aren't unique per se, they are just unique because we quote *literature*. This assumption also explains why Kramnick believes that, as soon as critics start quoting, they too, almost as if by contagion, become writers, for now the critic engages in "a making of novel artifacts from the medium in which literature itself is made" (97).

But are quotation techniques really the decisive and unique method of literary criticism? Can truth claims be based on correct quotations alone? After all, quotations alone don't necessarily provide insight or understanding, let alone an argument. To get past such questions, Kramnick introduces the idea of "scaling up" (47). Quotation technique is the "microscale" of close reading (46). But once we get the quotations right, we scale up to larger arguments

and claims. "Apt quotation," Kramnick writes, "builds a lattice that may be scaled up to larger matters of interest." (64). This account of how critics think strikes me as untrue to experience. What literary critic selects her quotations without having, at a minimum, a vague idea about the text as a whole? When I write, I sometimes realize that a specific quotation forces me to rethink and, therefore, rewrite something. Or that a particular line brings out an argument I had only vaguely formulated so far, thereby allowing me to sharpen and improve it. But in what way is this "scaling up"? What exactly am I "scaling up" by strengthening or by changing my argument?

Kramnick also imports the idea of "scaling up" into his discussion of the hermeneutic circle: "The 'art' of hermeneutics," he writes, consists in "building up from individual phrases, ideas, sentences, beliefs, and works" (68). But the whole point of the hermeneutic circle is to contest the Cartesian idea that we always build understanding by adding layers to an already secure foundation. Gestalt theorists and phenomenologists would point out that understanding often begins with a perception of a totality, which we only later analyze into parts if we feel the need to. The hermeneutic circle is a theory of how we steadily deepen and expand our understanding wherever we start from in the circle, not a theory of how we "scale it up" from atomistic building blocks. Insofar as Kramnick treats "microscale" quotations a little like measurements in the sciences, small units to be collected and analyzed before larger claims can be made, the whole idea of "scaling up" appears to me to be indebted to positivist notions of science and truth.

Kramnick's arguments for why literary criticism creates truth also draws on positivism. Truth in literary criticism emerges when "[t]he quoted words in a sentence of criticism . . .. fit the words you attach to and around them" (57). Or in other words, "[c]riticism is true when it is apt, false when it is formed poorly" (12). Truth is "perspicuity, elegance, and dexterity" (25). Critical quotation requires elegance of fit: "Elegance is aptness, and aptness elegance." Elegance is not a matter of argument but of form: "[T]o break the form would be to strain the assertion" (58). Form, in its turn, is shape. Embedded quotations, Kramnick claims, are true if they fit elegantly or aptly with the "already existing shape of the encountered world, so the veracity of any inquiry depends on how well the performance is done" (57). By "the encountered world," Kramnick means the language of the quoted text: "When I have used the term "world" . . . I of course have meant language, the only kind of thing one could embed or extend in a sentence" (97).

It's hard to see why any of these arguments would be right. Why would elegant or apt quotation techniques necessarily produce truthful claims? Can't I quote elegantly in the service of completely

wrong-headed ideas? I can't be alone in thinking that the quality of a reading depends not primarily (or even secondarily) on the critic's quotation technique but also on the force, plausibility, originality, and importance of the arguments being made. But Kramnick stands his ground. A critical claim, he declares, is "true or false in virtue of its aptness to compel our assent, our appraisal of it as well-formed, perspicuous, or adroit" (78).

I noted above the formalist idea that form is shape. But if form is shape, it is divorced from meaning. Understood in this way, form alone can't mean anything. How can shapes unattached to any kind of meaning guarantee truth? Another formalist move is to take one formal phenomenon (in this case quotation techniques) out of its context of significant use and, thus, out of the context in which it makes sense. The effect is to assume that a given quotation technique always does the same work regardless of how it is used in a specific case. Such an assumption is profoundly unlikely.

Kramnick believes that good quotation technique "validates" literary criticism: "Nothing invalidates a piece of criticism more than its breaking the fine composition of what is read, either by the force of error or the weight of brackets, ellipses, and interpolation" (88–89). Yet no committee I have ever served on has discussed the use of brackets and ellipses in applicants' writing samples. Nor are they a major feature of tenure reports or book reviews.

Kramnick doesn't say anything about what a critic chooses *not* to quote, thereby excluding from consideration a common source of potential error in close reading.[9] Nor has he anything to say about the existential and intellectual risk of writing, the idea that, as Cavell thought, the fundamental critical gesture is "This is what I see, can you see it too?"[10] By giving voice—form and expression—to our own reading (interpretation), we stake ourselves in our claims. We make our vision or understanding public and hope it will be shared. Maybe others will see what we see. But even if they don't, at least not right now, it doesn't follow that we are wrong. Kramnick, I assume, would disagree, for he thinks that institutional or professional "appraisal" or evaluation (84) of our quotation techniques act as "verification" (83) of the critic's work.

In the end, the whole question of truth in criticism appears to me to be badly posed in Kramnick's book. Truth as opposed to what? Lies? Plagiarism? The invention of fake quotations? Clunky punctuation? Kramnick doesn't say. In any case, blatant falsifications of quotations are quite unusual. They are certainly not often invoked as the main reason why a reading is bad. The word "bad" itself is revealing here, for literary critics don't in fact talk about a "true" interpretation (reading) of *Madame Bovary*. Our terms of praise aren't epistemological, as Kramnick assumes; they don't

operate in the register of true and false but in the register of good and bad. We praise readings by calling them powerful, original, path-breaking, imaginative, convincing (and so on) and dismiss them by calling them boring, unimaginative, plodding, predictable, pedestrian, unconvincing (and so on). It might have been more useful to begin an inquiry into the value of literary criticism with the terms critics actually use.

Finally, Kramnick wants to "banish the specter of positivism" (88). But as we have seen, his idea of "scaling up" places him in close vicinity to that philosophy. So does the use of terms such as "verification" and "falsification." For positivists, only propositions convey truth (knowledge). A proposition is a sentence, a claim, about the world, that is either true or false. A proposition is, thus, the sort of claim that can be falsified or verified by checking the world, as it were. Other kinds of sentences, such as statements about right and wrong, good and bad, are mere opinions, expressions of personal preference, and convey no truth. (J. L. Austin's 1962 *How To Do Things With Words*, with its invention of the concept of performative utterances, is a full-scale attack on this view.)

Kramnick's "apt quotations" strike me as a kind of aesthetic and formalist version of the positivist proposition. So does the idea of "scaling up" to larger claims from the atomistic building blocks of the quotation. After all, his in-sentence quotations are supposed to correspond to a state of affairs, namely the language of the literary text. We can check the quotations against the text (which Kramnick at times calls a "world"), looking for correct reproduction of the syntax, form, shape of the original work. This process is akin to positivistic verification. (Are the words the same? Is the syntax respected?) Admittedly, Kramnick also wants us to assess the sentences containing embedded quotations for elegance, dexterity, and aptness. This assessment is an exercise of aesthetic judgment. If the critic's sentences pass this double test, they are true, regardless of what they actually say.

Kramnick appears utterly uninterested in the question of change, of the new. Nevertheless, there is much to like in Kramnick's picture of literary criticism. For it is true that critics too are writers, that writing is thinking as well as craft, and that to write criticism is to be creative, to make something. But if Kramnick proves as much, it's not because of his quotation techniques but because he writes with clarity and grace. Unfortunately, I don't find Kramnick's ideas convincing at all.

5. Guillory: Professional Deformation and Resistance to Change

The 400 densely printed pages of *Professing Criticism* make for rewarding, if not exactly easy, reading. The purpose of the book is to explain how literary criticism—once the domain of writers and free intellectuals, a noble part of journalism and magazine writing—became an academic discipline and a profession, and to analyze its current problems. One of Guillory's leitmotifs is the tension between the discipline—the subject matter, the intellectual inquiry—and the profession, particularly as it is formed by the institutional demands of the university.

Combining intellectual history with sociology of culture, *Professing Criticism* is at once a learned historical account and a sociological and intellectual analysis of the discipline and its current problems. The first three chapters set out the general framework. The remaining 300 pages focus on specific case studies, deepening and extending the initial analysis. Each chapter displays superb scholarship. Guillory the historian offers us chapters on the long life and slow death of rhetoric (alongside Latin and Greek) as a foundational discipline in Western education, on the brief and failed careers of *belles lettres* and philology, on how literature became the sort of concept it is today, and on the history and practice of composition in US universities. Guillory the sociologist of culture and analyst of our current discipline discusses the object of study in the humanities, the contradictions of global English, the problems of graduate education and evaluation of scholarship in the humanities, and the different ways in which the discipline of literary studies defines itself as against "lay reading." In the final chapter, he briefly discusses various justifications or rationales for literary criticism as a discipline. Generally level-headed, judicious and unpolemical, *Professing Criticism* doesn't really propose any specific solutions to the current crisis.

I now want to pursue, first, Guillory's discussion of the question of "professional deformation"—his account of what professionalization and disciplinary thinking does to the practitioners—and, second, his discussion of lay reading in greater detail. A discipline is united, Guillory writes, by an object and a method. In principle, the object should be literature and the method interpretation or reading, although, as Guillory notes, the recent "method wars" have made the very question of a method contentious.

When a field constitutes itself as a discipline, specialization ensues. With specialization comes bureaucracy: organizations and associations for all kinds of subfields. Guillory, amusingly, reminds us that Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (1882) criticizes

specialists. He could have added that, in Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890), Ibsen has some fun with that idea, by dismissing Hedda's husband, Jørgen Tesman, precisely as a bumbling specialist, someone whose idea of a good topic is "Brabantian Handicrafts in the Middle Ages."[11] In contrast, the dashing generalist Ejlert Løvborg has produced a manuscript concerning nothing less than "The development of culture in the future."[12] Yet, just as Nietzsche acknowledged that the specialist does become a master of his craft, Ibsen's Løvborg comes to an ugly end, while Tesman ends up with the professorship.

Professors are not just experts in a discipline; they also benefit from the prestige of their institution, the university. Insofar as we are first trained in, then employed by, that institution, we get formed by its protocols and values and caught up in the university's own bureaucratic structures. The university rewards research and graduate teaching and encourages us to think of undergraduate teaching as a chore. Everyone competes for teaching relief. In contrast, there is no such thing as bureaucracy relief, by which I mean the opportunity to simply read, write and teach, unencumbered by committees and meetings. (Guillory doesn't mention this contrast as a symptom of the institutional mindset.)

Every professional formation also entails "professional deformation" (4), which means not just blind spots, things the successful professional simply can't see, but also a particular mindset, personality traits and habits that go with the training and socialization the professional critic has undergone. What is that mindset? Guillory mentions secretiveness, rudeness, "overweening self-regard" (9), and a tendency to develop a corporate identity and habitus.

A crucial aspect of our professional deformation, Guillory writes, is the tendency to take the school to be the world. Literature professors overestimate the social value of their research, seemingly forgetting that it only reaches other specialists. They take their embrace of "topicality" (80), by which Guillory means "[p]olitical thematics that look familiar and often tired" (80–81) to have a crucial impact on society, although there is little evidence to back this belief up. Instead of asserting the social value of literary criticism, he suggests, critics might do better to assert the social value of literature, the only subject on which they have a "public claim to expertise" (80). On this point, Guillory could have reflected more on the effects of undergraduate teaching on the cultural life of a society. After all, undergraduate film majors, literature majors, art majors, and so on do go out in the world and make art that carries the marks of their intellectual formation.

The same professional deformation makes us cultivate "expert cultures" (27), which inevitably pit their members against the laity, which here means ordinary people. As a result, many professors cultivate excessive "difficulty of critical language," Guillory notes, possibly more for performative effect than out of genuine need (79). Both expertise and professional status pull in the same direction: toward an identification with the institutions of the professionalized discipline. Since deprofessionalization means loss of prestige, and therefore also loss of compensation, professors will be extremely reluctant to change. Although he doesn't exactly say it in so many words, Guillory is telling us that, in order to protect their own status, professors will close ranks against the new. Guillory may well be right about all this. But I kept wondering why he doesn't take the next step and ask what can be done to overcome this built-in conservatism or to change the parameters of our professional deformation. Or in other words, why doesn't Guillory want to theorize intellectual and disciplinary change?

Now for Guillory's discussion of lay reading. In the third of the three initial chapters that set out his key ideas, he discusses recent critiques of literary criticism, including Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, which he constantly refers to as a "manifesto" (at one point no less than three times on the same page). He takes completely for granted that Felski is arguing against professional expertise. Felski's argument, Guillory writes, amounts to an "imaginary fusion of the professional and amateur reader, both sharing the same practice of reading and the same distaste for the sour notes of critique" (94). (Let me say here that I see no arguments for such a "fusion" in Felski's book.) Given the fact that members of a professions must find ways to justify their claims to expertise, Guillory thinks Felski's arguments will fail to gain traction. Yet, in a later chapter on "Lay Reading," he does acknowledge—without crediting Felski—that we need a theory of how nonprofessionals read and agrees that we shouldn't repress the fact that we were all once ordinary readers.

I admire Guillory's book. Nevertheless, I found his account of Felski uncharacteristically condescending. In these pages, he veers towards paternalism, writing as if he were an older, more seasoned critic advising the woman critic to tone down her "vehemently" argued prose (93), scale back her overly simplistic feminism (he objects to Felski's calling the practitioner of certain kinds of critique "macho"), and, finally, desist from using personifications. He dismisses Felski's interest in the mood or affect of a work of literary criticism by noting that, in his view, the "value of criticism inheres in its discovery of a truth in literary or other cultural works, whatever feelings of affection or disaffection the critical reader might have about a given work" (96). But I don't think Felski is saying that we

must choose between truth and attention to our own feelings or affects. After all, if the suspicious critic uses the affect or mood of suspicion as a taken-for-granted starting point for his reading, why can't other affects also be a starting point for new investigations?

In the end, Guillory declares that he can't agree with Felski that "criticism of society has no place at all in literary criticism" (101). But Felski never says that we shouldn't criticize society. She says that we should reject the rhetorical and intellectual moves of a certain style of critique. By reading her in this way, Guillory gives the impression that he too genuinely believes that the rhetoric criticized by Felski provides the only road to social criticism. Against this limited view, we should remember that socialists, feminists, and gay activists did critical readings before the advent of the postmodern version of the hermeneutics of suspicion, which Felski takes aim at.

Here's why I care about this response to Felski. *The Limits of Critique* is, to my mind, something rare as gold in contemporary literary criticism—namely a book that is genuinely trying to break with an old paradigm, genuinely trying to say something new. In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski sets out to usher in a new intellectual thought-style, a new critical sensibility. The critical power of her book is her accurate pinpointing of how trite, boring, predictable, and smug certain literary critical moves carried out in the name of critique had become. Add to this smugness the never-ending fascination, among some proponents of critique, with obscure writing, taken to be a true sign of critical power, and it becomes easy to see that Felski's own highly readable writing style—the piling up of adjectives, the personifications, the lively generalizations—is a kind of enactment of the change she is arguing for.

Drawing attention to the emergence of postcritique, Felski wanted to move beyond a certain style, a certain sensibility of critical arrogance and condescension. She did not reject social criticism, nor did she replace truth with affect. She argued for a criticism that avoided the obscure style, and the same old holier-than-thou moves, a criticism that was alive, interesting, innovative, and well written, a criticism that was freer, fresher, and, frankly, more readable. In addition to these virtues, Felski's book was courageous, something even Guillory acknowledges when he observes that it "must have taken some courage" to challenge our discipline's "cherished political aims" (95).

It is not necessary to share all of Felski's theoretical views to praise her in the terms I just used. Felski and I share an interest in experience including the experience of reading. But she admires Bruno Latour and the Frankfurt School, and works in the field of sociology of culture. I admire Wittgenstein, ordinary language

philosophy, existentialism, and phenomenology. I work in the field of philosophy and literature. Moreover, my interest in ordinary language philosophy has made me question the classical understanding of what theory and concepts are and how they work, something Felski doesn't do. But in this context, none of these points matters. The many irate responses to Felski's work show what may happen when a discipline comes up against something radically new.

6. The New

In the end, these three books left me uninspired. I was disheartened by the lack of interest in women's voices. Nor could I find any inspiring new ideas. Robbins wants to uphold and preserve the canon of Left criticism and theory that has been in place for almost two generations. Kramnick remains captive to established formalist ideas about literary language and to positivist ideas about truth and verification. Insofar as Guillory's analysis explains why professionals will resist change, his neutral and scholarly stance actually reinforces the conclusion that change is almost impossible. In short, if Robbins and Kramnick look to the past for salvation, Guillory's theory shows that the future is unlikely to be any different.

But if our discipline is in crisis, shouldn't we be more interested in change? These critics never ask how the new enters the world of a discipline or how it is received when it shows up. If critical responses to Felski's work are anything to go by, the answer to the last question is "Badly." I can't help seeing the treatment of Felski's original and lively book as a distressing sign of a profession closing ranks against the new.

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Of course, Guillory is right to say that change threatens institutional and disciplinary privilege. Nevertheless, change happens, even in literary studies. In our fields, a new paradigm emerged when the 1960s' radical politics combined with the uptake of (mostly) French theory, a process that began in the 1970s and was largely completed by the end of the 1980s. But that paradigm, which combined intense politicization of the discipline with a warm embrace of high theory, has long since reached a point of exhaustion. Intellectually, we find ourselves in what Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) literally calls "crisis" (65), a situation in which practitioners have lost faith in the old paradigm's power to solve crucial problems but in which there is no clear way forward.

Kuhn remains the best theorist of paradigm shifts, particularly if we read him not as a kind of cryptostructuralist, as the first generation of his readers tended to do, but in the light of Wittgenstein's late philosophy, which he studied intensely when he was writing his epochal book.[13] In one particularly amusing (and distressing)

passage, he asks what it takes for a new paradigm to be taken up by practitioners in the field. The answer is, first and crucially, that the process is not entirely rational. Scientists (and, I add, literary critics) don't change their minds about fundamental assumptions in their field by the force of argument alone. (In my experience, Kuhn is absolutely right!) Rather, it takes some kind of "conversion experience" (Kuhn 203). But that experience can't be forced. As a result, change happens mainly in three ways: (1) young people looking for new ideas enter the discipline; (2) a few experienced practitioners find that the new paradigm actually solves some problems they have been working on; but (3) given that the majority of established practitioners never change their minds, the new paradigm doesn't become truly dominant until the "last holdouts have died," as Kuhn puts it (151). There is something depressing about this vision too: change is possible but only when the last dinosaurs are gone from the earth. It also inspires fear, for can I really be so sure that I myself am not one of the dinosaurs?

Where could I find a ray of light? At first, I only found more gloom. After spending so much time with these books, I began to feel a bit overwhelmed by the obvious "Americanocentrism" of the perspective, as if the future of literary criticism as a discipline were exclusively dependent on US institutions and US academic habitus. All three books are mostly geared to the concerns and needs of graduate students and professors in US universities. Even the major is invoked mostly as an occasion to lament the decline of the profession.

Yet, from an international perspective, the most striking feature of US universities is the liberal arts model, which simply doesn't exist in most other countries. Unlike most European students, American undergraduates are not locked into one single disciplinary course of study right from the start. This openness offers literary critics in US universities an opportunity that colleagues in other countries don't have, namely the chance to reach a great number of students across or beyond the disciplines, not just in the first two years but later too. Could this curriculum be a reason for hope? If it isn't, what does it tell us about the nature of our discipline? About us?

Notes

1. Robbins reprints this passage from p. 375 in his essay "Not So Well Attached," *PMLA*, vol. 132, no. 2, March 2017, pp. 371–76. I found it just as shocking when I first read it.

2. See *The Claim of Reason* (1979) for Cavell's most thorough investigation of this philosophical temptation.

3. I write about this presupposition in "A Wittgensteinian Phenomenology of Criticism," *Wittgenstein and Literary Studies* (2022), pp. 40–60.

4. Two other key critics associated with these terms—Robbins's colleague at Columbia, Sharon Marcus, and her co-author Stephen Best—lurk in the wings, although Robbins only makes one explicit reference to them. See Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations*, no. 108, 2009, pp. 1-21.

5. I discuss Marcuse's disdain for the ordinary, his belief in the existence of intrinsically critical philosophical concepts, in Chapter 7 of *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell* (2017).

6. Scholars of Marguerite Duras will know Fernandez as the writer who helped Duras to get an apartment in the building he lived in on rue Saint-Benoît. In "Ghostly Demarcations: On Ramon Fernandez," Alice Kaplan reminds us that he also turns up in Wallace Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West" (written in 1934, before Fernandez threw in his lot with French fascism), See "Ghostly Demarcations," *The Nation*, 15 February 2010, web.

7. The ideas here stem from my reading of the original French edition in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (1994), pp. 15-51.

8. I discuss the faulty picture of intention at work in some literary theories in Chapter 9 of *Revolution of the Ordinary*.

9. In her fine essay, "What We Mean by Reading," *New Literary History*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2020, pp. 93-114, Elaine Auyoung pays close attention to what critics leave out in their quotations.

10. This is a loose rendering of Cavell's wording in "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," *Must We Mean What We Say?* (2002), pp. 73–96.

11. "den brabantske husflid i middelalderen." My translation.

12. "fremtidens kulturgang." My translation.

13. I discuss Kuhn's idea of a paradigm at length in my essay "The Question of the New: Wittgenstein, Kuhn, Cavell," *The Journal of Cavellian Studies*, vol. 10, December 2022, pp. 7–31.

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